

## Gaining trust: the articulation of transparency by You Tube fashion and beauty content creators

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## **Gaining trust: the articulation of transparency by You Tube fashion and beauty content creators.**

**Abstract:** This article proposes a new typology of transparency markers in fashion and beauty You Tube videos. It looks at how online content creators disclose the process of selecting and featuring products in their videos and analyses their discursive performance of transparency. It argues that these content creators employ a mix of routines of transparency, authenticity and independence, which they perform simultaneously, constructing themselves as trustworthy. The article suggests that, although restricted in both their extent and regularity, these tactics are complex and offer a glimpse on some of the processes that shape content in beauty and fashion media, which are not normally acknowledged in the magazine press. The article contributes to a better understanding of the manifestation of transparency in new media forms.

Transparency is seen as a central value in media content (Hellmueller et al., 2013; Vos and Craft, 2017), as audiences increasingly demand more accountability from the media (Craft and Heim, 2009). Mainstream journalism, for example, uses a range of tactics to translate transparency into observable textual features (Karlsson, 2010), to enhance its credibility, protect itself from criticism, and its professional identity from challenges by newer media forms (Allen, 2008). This article argues that newer media forms, and specifically self-employed content creators, also translate transparency into identifiable features, through a systematic “performance” which aims to earn trust. The article proposes a novel taxonomy of ways this is done in a type of You Tube videos. It thus offers new evidence towards a better understanding of the manifestation of transparency and its centrality in media forms.

Mainstream journalists view bloggers, You Tubers, and other self-employed content creators as different from themselves: as amateur commentators or paid promoters of brands (Ferrucci and Vos, 2017). However, in lifestyle, fashion and beauty media, these content creators share features with print magazines, such as identifying with readers’ lives, constructing closeness with an imagined community, and providing them with “expert”

advice, at the same time as promoting consumerism (Ellonen and Johansson, 2015; Wright, 2017). Just like women's magazines have long done (Duffy, 2013; McRobbie, 1997), fashion and beauty content creators also promote a "feminised consumption of branded goods" (Duffy, 2016: 443). Content creators are an important competitor for magazines, especially as the latter extend to online platforms (Abrahamson, 2015; Jain et al., 2017). Indeed Abidin and Ots (2015) consider them a successor to women's magazines.

This study proposes a new taxonomy of transparency tactics in fashion and beauty You Tube videos. It focusses particularly on whether and how their creators make transparent relationships with corporate brands as sources for content. Whether and how they are explicit to their audience about how they balance "editorial integrity with commercial pressures", a challenge that has long been faced but rarely explicitly addressed by magazines (Duffy, 2013: 105). It argues that, whereas magazine journalism may rely on institutional reputation to earn audiences' trust, the You Tube content creators studied seek it through a complex narrative that *co-articulates* transparency, authenticity and independence values. The article proposes that these elements reinforce each other in an attempt to encourage trust.

### **Content creators and promotion**

Influencers is a term increasingly used for online content creators who produce fashion, beauty and lifestyle content across different platforms including their blogs, You Tube, Instagram and other social media. Influencers "are everyday, ordinary Internet users who accumulate a relatively large following on blogs and social media through the textual and visual narration of their personal lives and lifestyles", and who monetise this activity by

integrating promotion of commercial brands in their content (Abidin, 2015). They are a type of “microcelebrity”, as they became known to a broader audience through social networking sites and video sharing platforms (Senft, 2008: 25). The more successful among them construct a consistent personal brand across all their content (Marwick and boyd, 2010, Tarnovskaya, 2017).

This article uses the more narrow term “content creator”, because the influencers examined here became known only through creating online content. They thus differ from celebrities established in other domains (TV or modelling), who may also act as social media influencers. The “demotic turn” (Turner, 2006) enabled by social media allowed ordinary people to gain public visibility, become self-employed media workers, and transcend boundaries between amateur and professional. Although they don’t have the institutional status of mainstream media, the content they create serves similar functions: like women’s magazines, fashion, beauty and lifestyle content on You Tube and blogs also constructs a perception of closeness with an audience community, and promotes commodified versions of identity (Duffy, 2013).

More specifically, content creators engage in “commodification through intimacy” (Berryman and Kavka, 2017: 310): they promote products by encouraging a perception of personal closeness with their audience. Abidin and Thompson (2012) identify techniques such as using endearing language; providing behind-the-scenes access to their lives; emphasising mundane aspects of their lives to persuade followers that they are just like them; and arranging face-to-face meet-ups. Intimacy with followers is at the core of many content creators’ personal brand (Berryman and Kavka, 2017; Tarnovskaya, 2017; Marwick, 2015; Duffy, 2016).

Influencers are often caught between the pressure of advertisers, who provide funding for their work, and who can demand seamless integration of their products in editorial content, and that of audiences who, by engaging with their content, give influencers the power to attract advertisers (Kretz and de Vach, 2010). Native advertising is “paid advertising that takes the specific form and appearance of editorial content from the publisher” and is not marked as third party advertising (Wojdyski and Evans, 2016:157). When advertising is not flagged up, the boundary between sponsored and editorial content can be blurred, and influencers’ personal taste can be hard to separate from content they are paid to endorse (Abidin and Ots, 2015; Kretz and de Vach, 2010).

However, audiences demand content that represents a creator’s genuine opinions, and distrust those they perceive to have become too commercialised (Kozinets et al., 2010; Lothia et al., 2013). “Branding scandals”, where content presented as editorial was revealed to be part of a paid campaign, have led to audience suspicion about hidden advertising and pushed content creators towards more self-regulation and disclosure (Abidin and Ots, 2015).

These developments have also brought on more external regulation of influencer content. The UK’s Advertising Standards Agency (ASA) requires that all types of promotion are clearly marked as such. Its guidelines (ASA, 2018a, 2018b) require that influencers explicitly mark as advertising all content controlled by advertisers, and paid for in money or in kind (free products/trips), as well as affiliate links that allow influencers to receive commission on sales. The US Federal Trade Commission (FTC) has had a policy since 2009, which requires disclosure when individuals have received “compensation for writing or producing product reviews” (Walden et al., 2015:255). Walden et al. (2015), however, found that bloggers understand

compensation in different ways, with most of them taking it to mean financial compensation and to exclude product gifting or free trips.

Although paid advertising is usually clearly distinguishable in mainstream media, common PR practices like gifting products to magazines for review and taking journalists to press trips and product events are usually not openly acknowledged. The boundaries between promotion and editorial content can also be bent in mainstream media (Duffy, 2013), but the prevalent narrative in institutional journalism is that the two are strictly separate. As will be discussed below, trust in institutional media partly relies on their established brand and they receive less scrutiny than content creators on how they produce their content. For content creators though, audience trust is tied to perceptions of authenticity and transparency.

### **Authenticity, transparency and trust**

Authenticity, namely being oneself in public, seeming to speak and act sincerely, openly and genuinely as a “real person” instead of a constructed persona (Tolson, 2010), is a differentiating feature between content creators and institutional media. Content creators need to be seen by their followers as ordinary people (Marwick, 2015), and not as institutional voices. Even though what content creators selectively show is part of a self-constructed public persona, it should not come across as such. Authenticity functions as a “productive myth”, allowing influencers to “conceal the fact that they are often embedded in the same commercial milieu as those institutional sites [media, advertising] from which they distance themselves” (Duffy, 2013:106).

To achieve distance from these sites and encourage the perception that they are ordinary people, just like their followers, even after they have achieved considerable commercial success, content creators use discursive techniques which “misrecognise their [insider] status” by feigning similarity with their followers, self-deprecation, or making fun of their embarrassing moments (McQuarrie et al., 2012:151). They combine this “authentic” ordinariness with a narrative of expertise in fashion or makeup, in what Tolson (2010: 283) calls a “hybrid discourse of the ‘ordinary expert’”. The idea is for their expertise to be seen as deriving from their experience as users of products, not from being industry insiders.

This discursive articulation of authenticity appears to be effective in earning them trust: young beauty blog followers were found to perceive influencers’ expertise as more credible than that of women’s magazines, because the former is based on “genuine passion”, which the institutional press was perceived as lacking (Wright, 2017:314). Audience trust in turn impacts content creators’ effectiveness both in attracting more followers and in promoting brands (Lathia et al., 2013).

Trust is about audiences feeling “confident they are not being lied to” and it “is earned through the regular provision of information that is credible” (Hayes et al., 2007:263). Authenticity, as defined so far, aims to encourage trust, via content that appears to be unscripted, spontaneous, ordinary and imperfect (Enli, 2016), therefore not a lie. Just like authenticity, transparency also aims to earn trust. Media transparency means providing an explanation of where the content presented originated, why it was selected and presented as it was (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2007), and publicising the behind-the-scenes processes that shaped this content (Karlsson et al., 2014).

Transparency is neither a new concept nor exclusive to the media. A requirement for openness and disclosure has long been placed on actors in all areas of public life, including government, politicians, public services and private corporations (Heald 2006). Indeed Habermas (1989) stresses the importance of transparency for those with power in the public sphere. However, the demand for accessible and coherent information about organisations' operation processes has intensified in an increasingly audit-oriented society (Power, 1997).

The media do not only scrutinise other institutions, but are themselves under public scrutiny. Transparency thus functions as "an instrumental value" called upon to protect mainstream media's own legitimacy from external criticism, "by letting people see the process that leads to the creation of [their] products" (Allen, 2008:324). It serves to reveal to audiences the complexities of generating media content and to protect professionals from suggestions that they are deceiving audiences. Ultimately the aim is to enhance credibility and social standing both for media organisations and those working in them, and to establish their jurisdiction against other groups, such as publicity agents or, more recently, bloggers (Allen, 2008).

Transparency involves disclosing the ways in which the media gather and check material (including when this material is promotional), how editorial decisions are made and topics are chosen, which sources are used and how, who writers are and what are their potential biases. It means making such information accessible to those who may actively seek it (availability transparency), or proactively disclosing it to audiences who don't ask for it (disclosure transparency) (Craft and Heim, 2009). Transparency may involve revealing single events or entire editorial processes, including how and why topics, material and sources were selected



(process transparency); it can be done in real time or in retrospect; and it can be substantial or nominal (Heald, 2006). In the latter case it is possible to give an illusion of transparency, without actually providing substantial information, just like it is possible to give an illusion of authenticity, without being “real”. This is because what is made transparent is selected by the creators of the content and “those things that can be easily made transparent” are more likely to be disclosed (Craft and Heim, 2009).

Transparency is important for earning trust in all media, but it is arguably more important on platforms such as blogging (Singer, 2007), where content creators often lack the established institutional name that may confer trust to established media organisations (Hayes et al., 2007). That said, although transparency may intend to achieve trust, it is not necessarily causally connected to it (O’Neil, 2002; Allen, 2008; Karlsson et al., 2014). Transparency, like objectivity (Tuchman, 1972), was found to function rather as a technique or a “ritual” performed by mainstream journalists in their effort to present a trustworthy image and fend off criticism (Karlsson, 2010). Like authenticity, transparency is about self-presentation and an intent to convince of one’s credibility (Chadha and Koliska, 2015).

Although the literature often associates transparency with the practices of online content creation (Lasica, 2005; Hayes et al., 2007), relatively little is known about the specific discursive patterns expressing transparency norms in this content. Such patterns matter because, as Karlsson (2010) points out, in order to have any kind of effect, transparency needs to be translated into tangible tactics that media practitioners a) routinely apply in their work and b) communicate to audiences as things aiming at transparency. In his own study of mainstream news organisations’ online articles, he identifies transparency tactics used by

journalists: hyperlinks to original material and sources, corrections of mistakes, regular editing and updating of items, contributors' contact details, opportunities for readers to comment, contribute to or correct items, polls and chats.

The present study identifies previously unexplored transparency tactics that beauty and fashion content creators use in their You Tube videos to explain the *process* of creating their content, and particularly how they select which products to feature. It thus analyses their discursive construction of "process transparency" (Heald, 2006) and more specifically:

**RQ 1.** How do beauty/fashion/lifestyle content creators discursively articulate the process of selecting and featuring products in their You Tube videos?

**RQ 2.** Which tactics do they use to disclose transparency and how often do they use them?

Previous research on disclosure of promotional content focused on how *written* paid advertising disclaimers are worded (e.g. "advertisement", "sponsored"); their timing, duration, prominence and positioning in the content; on these factors' impact on audience recognition of the ad (Wojdyski and Evans 2016; Wojdyski et al., 2017; Evans et al., 2017); as well as on the (mostly negative) effect of ad recognition on viewers' subsequent attitudes, purchase intention and behaviour (see Evans et al., 2017 for a comprehensive review of these consumer effects studies). Broadly this research found that the less ambiguous the wording and the earlier and more prominent the positioning, the easier it is for audiences to notice that content is promotional, but this then reduces the effectiveness of the advertising.

The present article is not concerned with written disclaimers of advertising, nor its effects on consumers, but with You Tube content creators' discursive construction of transparency in disclosing the processes of creating their content. This content may feature commercial products, whether that involves paid or non-monetary exchanges with companies, including trips, invitations to press events and gifting of free products. The article identifies and classifies a range of specific tactics that manifest transparency in this content.

## **Methods**

This study uses two methods. Content analysis of three You Tubers' videos for a period of one year (25/06/2017 – 25/06/2018) revealed a range of discursive tactics which manifest process transparency. This is complemented by discourse analysis of individual videos where these content creators extensively discuss the process of working with brands.

The sample included three beauty and fashion content creators, who have their own blogs, You Tube channels, Instagram and Twitter accounts. Of these platforms the research focused specifically on You Tube, because the format (videos between 5 and 50 minutes long) allows content creators to expand in considerable length on their practices in a way that is not possible on Instagram or Twitter. The content creators' blogs were not analysed because they were not updated as regularly as their You Tube channels, and in 2017-18 blogs were no longer the primary platform for any of the three content creators.

The three content creators included in this study are:

- Estee Lalonde<sup>i</sup>: 1,212,770 You Tube subscribers in July 2018, 100-400,000 views per video ([www.YouTube.com](http://www.YouTube.com)). Represented by WME talent management agency, whose roster includes musicians, authors, comedians and other talents.
- Lily Pebbles: 471,780 You Tube subscribers in July 2018, 70-130,000 views per video ([www.YouTube.com](http://www.YouTube.com)). Represented by Gleam agency, who manage digital talent only.
- Fashion Mumblr (Josie Fear): 298,835 You Tube subscribers in July 2018, 20-60,000 views per video ([www.YouTube.com](http://www.YouTube.com)). Working without any agency in July 2018.

All three content creators are established in the fashion/beauty You Tube genre: at the time of writing they had been full-time content creators for at least 5 years, had over 250,000 subscribers, and they regularly collaborated with well-known brands. This choice was made because the study sought to map transparency tactics among an emerging group of professionals with experience and success in this genre. They were also selected based on the following criteria: a) they are UK based and produce beauty, fashion and lifestyle content for a similar demographic (mostly women in their 20s and 30s); b) they have different numbers of subscribers and views per video; c) they have different management arrangements: management agencies are responsible for securing commercial deals and supporting content creators with legal and practical aspects of their work. Those represented by the same agency tend to have similar approaches to issues of disclosure. All three produced a similar mix of fashion, beauty and lifestyle content during the sampling period<sup>ii</sup>.

All their You Tube videos within this period were included in the content analysis. A total of 282 videos were analysed, amounting to 80 hours, 36 minutes and 51 seconds. The variables recorded included the date and duration of each video, the number of commercial products

featured (spoken about; or demonstrated; or appearing on screen but not talked about – e.g. worn) and whether there was a written disclosure statement that the video contained sponsored content. All videos were subsequently watched carefully with an aim to identify consistent ways in which the content creators disclosed how and why they selected the products they featured (indicators or markers of process transparency). These markers were then used as variables and their presence was measured across all videos. They were grouped together under common themes and are presented and discussed in detail in the next section.

The quantitative content analysis of the entire corpus is complemented by a thematic analysis of selected videos, where two of the content creators discuss in length how they feature commercial products in their editorial content. These are: *How I work with brands* ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=trDY\\_lmdxy8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=trDY_lmdxy8)), by Lily Pebbles, posted on 03/06/2018 (41mins 31secs); and *How I afford luxury travel* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Pft2lqCegg>) by Fashion Mumblr, posted on 29/06/2018 (34mins 26secs). These are the only items where this topic is the main focus of the video. The two videos provide rich qualitative data on these creators' discursive construction of process transparency, beyond the markers identified in the content analysis. The content of these videos was transcribed and the analysis examines common themes in their discourse.

### **Markers of process transparency**

The content analysis revealed that, despite popular perceptions of content creators as opaque about their processes, all three creators examined used a wide range of tactics to disclose why and how they selected the products they featured. The typology of markers that

will be detailed in this section was common between the three content creators, which might suggest there is a degree of homogeneity among these established fashion and beauty YouTubers in how they manifest process disclosure. This section will argue that these markers work together, rather than individually, to co-construct trustworthiness.

The most established of the three content creators in the sample, with the highest audience engagement (number of subscribers and views per video), posted the smallest amount of content. Estee Lalonde has the highest profile of the sampled YouTubers, with over a million subscribers and prestigious brand collaborations. Over the 12 months, she uploaded half and a fifth of the number of videos of the other two content creators respectively (table 1). She also had a relatively low number of explicit advertising disclosure statements, in 13.1% of her videos (table 1), though this is not dissimilar to Fashion Mumblr (the content creator with the fewest subscribers), who acknowledged paid advertising in just 10.9% of her videos.

Table 1. Overall Number of Videos

	Number of videos	Total time length	Number of products featured	Videos with explicit Ad disclosure
Estee Lalonde	38	09:22:34	865 (average/video 22.7)	5 (13.1%)
Lily Pebbles	70	18:24:20	1308 (av./video 18.7)	16 (22.8%)
Fashion Mumblr	174	52:49:57	6807 (av./video 39.1)	19 (10.9%)

The transparency markers that emerged from the corpus are shown in table 2. All operationalise verbal statements, expressed in similar wording across the videos. The first category of markers, “discussing paid deals”, normalises the fact that receiving payment to feature products is part of the content creator’s work. This does not include disclaimers on

individual videos that contain advertising (explicit ad disclosures were measured separately in table 1), but instead involves transparency about the overall paid promotion process in videos which are not themselves explicitly sponsored. For instance, the content creator may casually mention that she worked with a company in the past, that she had meetings to discuss collaboration, or may emphasise that her comments about a specific product are not paid advertising (thus acknowledging that the practice itself is common).

The second category, “discussing PR influence on content”, involves acknowledging that certain products are featured due to the efforts of public relations to bring them to the attention of the content creator. Here content creators acknowledge that they were sent free products to review, that they went to events or trips for products that they feature, or that brands gave them discounts to get these products cheaper or free. The third category, “establishing authentic taste”, involves the content creator asserting that they feature products they selected through their own experience: they recommend products they’ve used for a long time, that they bought themselves, or that their friends recommended to them, just like ordinary viewers would take friends’ recommendations. The fourth category, “establishing independent judgement”, emphasises that the content creator assesses the products they choose to feature; for instance that they selected products after consideration of many alternatives, that they didn’t like a product initially, or they are featuring it because it has some advantages, but also highlight its shortcomings.

Table 2: Process Transparency Markers (% of products featured)

	Estee Lalonde	Lily Pebbles	Fashion Mumblr
Tactic a: discussing paid deals			

I went to a meeting with a company to discuss collaboration	0%	0.3%	0.5%
I am working/worked with this product brand (ongoing, not on a specific video)	0.7%	1.7%	0.9%
This is not paid advertising	0.3%	0.1%	0.2%
Tactic b: discussing PR influence			
I went to a press trip/event for this product	1.4%	1.4%	3.9%
This product was sent to me	2%	10%	10.8%
I bought this product with a voucher from a company	0%	0.6%	0.2%
Tactic c: establishing authentic taste			
This product is an old favourite	2.2%	1.4%	2.5%
Another blogger/friend recommended the product to me	2.1%	2.9%	0.3%
I bought this product	12.2%	10.1%	8.4%
Tactic d: establishing independent editorial judgement			
Sceptical about this product / highlights shortcomings	0.9%	2.1%	0.4%
I didn't like this product originally, but now I like it	0%	0.4%	0%
Difficult to choose which products to include (% of videos)	15.8%	4.3%	1.1%

All these are transparency markers because they reveal to audiences how and why products featured in the videos were selected. However in doing this, the three content creators appeal to notions not only of *transparency*, but also of *authenticity* (category c) and *independence* (category d). As was discussed in a previous section, these notions are interconnected with trust. Trust is sought in the analysed videos via a combination of showing that the content creator makes her own authentic choices just like an ordinary person, separates herself from the companies whose products she reviews, but at the same time does not conceal that she enjoys privileged access and benefits from the industry. Authenticity, transparency and independence work *together* in these tactics, co-presenting a credible, trustworthy image of the content creators. Whereas journalists use a combination of balance and transparency markers to earn trust (Karlsson, 2010), the beauty and fashion YouTubers analysed here do this through a combination of markers of independence, transparency and authenticity.

In addition to serving transparency, disclosing that they are paid to promote brands and are invited to their events also functions to ratify content creators' "taste leadership": it is a form



of acknowledgement of the influencer's personal taste and success that accords them status and cultural capital (McQuarrie et al., 2012). Perhaps for this reason, content creators tend to document press events and trips in their blogs and You Tube videos, whereas magazine journalists who go to the same events usually do not acknowledge them. On the other hand though, being perceived as having too close relationships with companies can reduce audience trust (Lathia et al., 2013). Therefore transparency in the analysed videos is a balancing act between concealing and revealing enough to maintain their status as elite YouTubers, their relatability as ordinary people, and the trust of their audience.

This may explain why the You Tubers analysed here used many different transparency tactics, but none of them too often. Most of the tactics identified in the sample were used under 10% of the time by each content creator (table 2). Long-term paid endorsements, like Estee Lalonde's for cosmetics brands Lancome and Garnier, were only acknowledged some of the time. This was particularly in videos documenting press trips, or in paid-for videos, whereas she also recommended their various products outside these videos without mentioning she's an ambassador of the companies. Fashion Mumblr also had videos in the corpus where ongoing collaborations with brands were not acknowledged.

### **The discursive performance of transparency**

The previous section argued that markers of transparency, independence and authenticity are interconnected within the transparency tactics used by the three content creators. In this section I argue that the same is true when examining in detail the discourses that manifest transparency in their narratives. The same three values are interweaved through a richer set

of discursive strategies in the two videos where Lily Pebbles and Fashion Mumblr (Josie Fear) detail the process of creating promotional content (paid or unpaid). This section will explore these interconnected manifestations of authenticity, transparency and independence within the two content creators' performance.

A performance is here understood as behaviour in front of an audience, motivated by how an individual wants to be perceived (Goffman, 1959). In this theatrical metaphor, we all perform to some extent in everyday life, crafting our identity in social interaction. Performances are made up of *routines*, namely patterns of action that express specific attributes dramatically: by performing these routines, the individual "implicitly requests his [sic] observers [...] to believe that the character they see actually possesses the attributes he appears to possess" (Goffman, 1959: 28). Performance thus "involves on the part of the performer an assumption of accountability to an audience for the way in which communication is carried out" (Bauman, 1975:293). It is behaviour with an audience's interpretation in mind.

Performing a routine does not necessarily imply falsification: whether or not the "performer" possesses these attributes does not change the fact that they have to perform them to be believed. The concepts of performance and routine are appropriate to illuminate content creators' construction of transparency because, as will be illustrated below, they engage in verbal and physical behaviour that explicitly appeals to an audience's perception of what features they possess, and this behaviour is made up of repeated patterns of discourse and action. The performance of the content creators in the two videos combines routines expressing transparency with routines expressing authenticity and independence.

### **a. Authenticity routines**

Authentic talk involves speaking in a “real”, spontaneous, conversational mode, not in a way that appears scripted or rehearsed, but that appears to be true to oneself (Montgomery, 2001). Lily Pebbles’ video *How I work with brands* is full of discursive manifestations of authenticity, presenting herself as a) humble, b) anxious about how what she says will be interpreted, and c) caring for her viewers.

Pebbles expresses humility primarily by indicating awareness of how she might be judged by viewers as pompous. This concern is based on second-guessing what the audience may think:

“I know that sounds a bit like maybe arrogant, but I could go out and buy a lipstick if I wanted to, so I don’t rely on them sending me free products.”

“We [content creators] don’t really want to show too much [of the free products we receive] either, because we don’t want to seem like we’re showing off.”

“Often when something is very expensive, I’ll say I got sent this, just so you guys don’t think, like, wow Lily’s started buying really expensive things, which she doesn’t normally.”

In the above examples, Pebbles shows humility by suggesting she doesn’t want to be perceived as “arrogant” or as “showing off”, but as an ordinary person who “doesn’t normally” buy expensive things. In saying this, she uses “an expressive idiom associated with intimacy or privacy” while speaking to an anonymous audience (Montgomery, 2001: 403):

she addresses viewers as “you guys”, and second-guesses their thoughts about her (“wow Lily’s started buying really expensive things”), as if she knows them personally. She often repeats that she is worried about their reaction to what she says. For example:

“I am terrified that I’m just going to say something slightly wrong and people are just going to pick up on that, so I’ve written myself notes, because I want to do this properly.”

“I’m terrified of putting this video up, hoping that you guys get it, hoping I didn’t say anything wrong, and I really hope it was interesting, eye opening, and I hope you will stick with me.”

Her discourse in the above examples expresses anxiousness (“I’m terrified”, “hoping I didn’t say anything wrong”) and concern about how she comes across (“I want to do this properly”). Her verbal performance is combined with physically consulting written notes, which further emphasises her humility and insecurity. Josie Fear also consults written notes in her video *How I afford luxury travel* and verbally draws viewers’ attention to them. Pebbles and Fear do not visibly use notes in their regular content: in these videos they suggest they are doing it because the issues they talk about are complicated and notes help them feel more confident. In this way they present themselves as uncertain, concerned about their reception, like an ordinary person would be, rather than as confident members of the media industry to whom these processes are taken-for-granted and straightforward. By performing these routines of ordinariness and authenticity they make their attempt at transparency more believable.

Authenticity in Pebbles' video is also expressed through showing care for her viewers and appealing to her close relationship with them. Evidence of "authentic caring" (Liebes, 2001) includes for example:

"It's tricky for me to figure out how to disclaim that [featuring gifted items], just so you guys don't feel like cheated in any way."

"None of the [paid] work I ever do is dependent on you guys spending any money. If a brand said to me we'll pay you depending on how many clicks the link gets, or how many purchases people make, I would just say no, cause that means I got an incentive to sell to you guys, and that's just not what it's about."

The above quotes demonstrate markers of care for how the content creator's audience might feel about promotional content ("so you guys don't feel cheated") and emphasise that the content creator takes measures to prevent these negative feelings. The interest she shows in their feelings again distances her from impersonal advertisers or media organisations.

The last quote above also emphasises that the relationship between the content creator and her audience is not one between a seller and a customer ("that's just not what it's about"), but a personal one. Fear's video does not display all the markers of authenticity that Pebbles' does, but she also appeals to an authentic, personal relationship with her audience:

"I am very lucky that you guys take my work very seriously, you trust my advice and you know that I wouldn't recommend somewhere I genuinely would not spend my own money on."

Fear appeals to her viewers knowing her as a person (“you know that I wouldn’t recommend somewhere I genuinely would not spend my own money on”) and expresses humility and gratitude for this relationship (“I am very lucky”). Like in the examples from Pebbles’ video, here again authenticity strengthens the believability of Fear’s transparency.

#### **b. Transparency routines**

Transparency is manifested in the discourse of the two You Tubers through a detailed, step-by-step explanation of the processes they follow when working with brands. Transparency is expressed primarily through the detail of their account. For example, Pebbles talks through each stage of creating a sponsored video both orally and by showing a blank paper where she writes down the steps by hand. The handwritten paper, as opposed to a polished graphic, adds to the authenticity of her account at the same time as emphasising transparency.

The process Pebbles describes involves the company contacting her, asking if she’s interested in paid collaboration, her requesting to try the product before engaging in further discussion, her indicating she is interested in working with them, the company sending their product messages, her using this to write a creative plan, the two parties negotiating this plan, her making the video, the company approving it or asking for changes to factual content, and the video being posted. Many of the processes she describes were previously identified as common practices influencers appeal to in interviews with researchers (Abidin and Ots, 2015). Pebbles mentions the ASA requirement to disclose paid advertising, but suggests that regulations are changing and there are many ways to disclose advertising:

“Before the ASA came about in terms of our space, I always used to write in the description box, this video is sponsored by this brand, just because I felt like I wanted to tell you guys. And then when it became more official, I put ‘ad’ in the title. I now put ‘ad’ in the thumbnail, because the way I interpret what the ASA have said - and everyone interprets it in a different way - I interpret it that I just need to warn you guys before consuming the content that there is a paid-for promotion in there.”

The content creator here, as in the entire video, gives details on what she personally does – this serves the purpose of presenting herself as responsible and transparent. She does not suggest there are common practices in the industry. By emphasising that she used disclaimers even before ASA regulation existed, she constructs herself as extra transparent, potentially going beyond what regulations may require.

Pebbles’ routine of providing detail to appear transparent also includes considerable detail about her relationship with PR teams, and how these might affect her reviews:

“I think over the years a lot of us have definitely created relationships and friendships with the PRs who work for the brands. [...] You may be less likely to want to bash a product because you like the PR, but I would never like give a positive review to a product just because I like the brand.”

“Some brands give you discount cards, which is probably something people don’t realize because you don’t have to disclaim anything like that [...] I have maybe four or five discount cards for some of the brands I shop at quite often.”

Like in her discussion of paid videos, here Pebbles acknowledges she is not required to disclose her processes (“you don’t have to disclaim anything like that”), but she still does anyway (“I have maybe four or five discount cards”). In the first example above transparency is interweaved with independence: alongside revealing details about her work (“a lot of us have definitely created relationships and friendships with the PRs”), the content creator emphasises her editorial integrity (“I would never give a positive review to a product just because I like the brand”). As will be seen in the next section, independence routines reinforce the performance of transparency in the videos.

Fear describes how she works with companies only orally but, like Pebbles, expresses transparency through the detail of her account. This includes being approached by tourist boards or hotels and invited to visit their countries or premises, in return for coverage on her platform. She explains that her accommodation is paid for, and that while she is there she makes her own content. In her narrative, she emphasises the mutually beneficial aspect (“a win-win situation”) of her relationship with these organisations:

“These hotels probably already have rooms just lying empty that they’re not earning any money on, so they can get a load of free marketing just by inviting an influencer along. It’s kind of a win-win situation. We get to go and experience nice hotels and make some content



there, and they get the word out there [...] and all it costs them is the cleaning and a little bit of food.”

Like Pebbles, Fears also pre-empts any negative interpretation of what she says. She doesn't do this by showing explicit concern about her viewers' reactions, as Pebbles did in the previous section, but by downplaying the perceived cost of what she is offered. In the quote above she emphasises that the free trips cost little (they “have rooms just lying empty”, “all it costs them is the cleaning and a little bit of food”), implying she is not being bribed.

### **c. Independence routines**

The third element characterising the performance of the two content creators in the analysed videos consists in discursive routines of independence. These emphasise the distance the You Tuber takes from the industry whose products she features, and work alongside the transparency and authenticity routines discussed in previous sections.

Pebbles' video emphasises repeatedly that she has strict editorial standards in creating both paid and non-paid content, which she would not break under any circumstances. These include not recommending products she doesn't like and trying out products she features:

“I would never recommend something if I didn't like it. [...] Often I've turned down big jobs, like really well paid exciting jobs, because I don't like the brand or don't like the product.”

“This step is 100% the most important for me. I always try a product if I haven’t tried it before, or look into a brand before working with them.”

Similarly, Fear also stresses she would not feature hotels she did not like: “I wouldn’t recommend somewhere I genuinely would not spend my own money on.”

All examples where the content creators assert their standards feature highly categorical language. This need for YouTubers to establish their own voice and a certain distance from the industry they promote is similar in some types of magazine journalism. For example, music journalists have always maintained a perception of editorial independence from record companies, whose products they basically promote through their reviews, in order to legitimate their position and distinguish their work from that of advertising (Stratton, 1982: 272). Music journalists achieve this through the discursive technique of identifying in their writing “either with the ‘artists’ or the ‘public’ as a strategy for keeping themselves separate from the record companies” (ibid).

Music journalists’ performance of independence is strengthened by the fact that they are not directly paid by the companies whose products they review (even though the media they work for do receive advertising from these companies), so they do not see themselves, individually, as selling products (Stratton, 1982). In magazine journalism, the financial relationship between content creator and content provider/advertiser is mitigated by the institutional presence of a media company. In the case of influencers, any financial relationship between content provider and content creator is direct and it is thus more difficult for the influencer to appeal to narratives about the separation of editorial and

advertising parts of their platform, which are common in mainstream journalism. Perhaps for this reason, these content creators explicitly emphasise their editorial standards in a way that legacy media do not often need to address.

## **Conclusion**

Transparency is becoming a normative aim for mainstream media (Chadha and Koliska, 2015; Hellmueller et al., 2013) at a time when society increasingly demands it, and when traditional institutions need to fight to maintain public trust (Allen, 2008). Whereas mainstream journalism has long been “among the most opaque industries” (Singer, 2005: 179), resisting transparency on the basis that it could violate journalistic autonomy, signs of a shift towards transparency are manifested in formal elements of mainstream news (Karlsson, 2010). Allen (2008) sees this shift not so much as an attempt to earn trust, but as an attempt to establish mainstream media’s professional jurisdiction against newer media.

In newer forms of media, transparency also plays a vital role. Similarly to journalists, how YouTube creators present themselves within their content is a core element of how they construct, or “perform”, a professional identity. This article has argued that the online content creators studied here do this through a combination of markers and discursive routines of transparency, authenticity and independence. This practice is different from what we know of mainstream media. Although traditional media can manifest transparency simply via a hyperlink, content creators use a more complex cluster of routines, because they need to maintain a non-institutional, ordinary person’s voice, and this requires more complex behaviour.

Whether content creators' *performance* of transparency makes them transparent is debatable. The findings of this study suggest that the content creators examined demonstrate a rich repertoire of transparency markers and routines, which are different from those used in mainstream online journalism (Karlsson, 2010). However these markers and routines were used selectively in the analysed videos, often enough to boost content creators' credibility, but not so often as to jeopardise their relatability. Rather than offering a true "look behind the curtain" (Chadha and Koliska, 2015: 219), allowing audiences to see the entire process through which topics were selected and material was obtained to produce the final content, the tactics and routines analysed in this article allow a peek behind the curtain. Ultimately this partial peek serves the content creators' self-presentation more than it serves audiences' interests or any true "understanding" of commodification of content in the public sphere.

Still, this peek matters because it is arguably more than what traditional journalism allows, at least in the equivalent genre of beauty and fashion magazines. These almost never address the impact on their content of their relationships with corporate brands. Some suggest that traditional journalists and amateur-professional creators can learn from each other (Outing, 2004; Philips, 2010) and this could be an area where this might be possible.

As external regulation of influencer content becomes more rigorous (ASA, 2018b), there appears to be a parallel trend for transparency inside this industry, at least among some of its more established members, like the ones studied here. Ultimately, audience demand for transparency drives both regulators and influencers. The difference seems to be that whereas external regulation approaches trust-building by means of marking individual videos or posts

as “trustworthy” and flagging up any form of promotional content, in the practices analysed here, credibility is sought as a product of a relationship built with audiences over time, based on a co-performance of authenticity, transparency and independence.

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<sup>i</sup> Not all the content creators’ real names are public. Their publicly available names are used here.

<sup>ii</sup> The sampling period was before the ASA (2018b) published stricter regulations on influencer content in autumn 2018. As mentioned in the previous section, the new regulations demand disclosure of all promotional processes, not only sponsored videos as was the case before. This article suggests that before such disclosure became a requirement, content creators had established transparency tactics in their videos to account for a range of content selection processes. These tactics became more regular and systematic after autumn 2018.

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